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ABSTRACT

To determine whether the use of obscenities at college demonstrations creates negative hostile responses among the general population or positive and inclusive feelings toward the demonstrators, or both responses, interviews were conducted in the Denver Metropolitan area. An interview questionnaire was administered to 200 informants, 175 caucasians and 25 other races, of whom 55 were under the age of 30, 75 were between 30 and 49, and 67 were 50 and older. For study purposes, obscenity was operationally defined as "sex, body, and toilet words, but not words like 'hell' and 'damn'." Scaled and open-ended responses were obtained. The data obtained show the following: (1) the Denver area sampled reacted extremely negatively toward the use of obscenity in college demonstrations; (2) non-caucasians were much less negatively affected than were caucasians; (3) younger persons responded more favorably than did those who were older; (4) attitude toward sex and familiarity with obscenity were found to be affected by the variable of age; and (5) persons under 30, as well as those with a positive sex attitude, were much less likely to give responses of "disgust" and "anger." It is suggested that an age-related cluster of attitudes determines reactions, and obscenity is more effective for reaching specific groups. (DB)

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# REACTIONS OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC TO OBSCENITY AT COLLEGE DEMONSTRATIONS

Special Session: Communication, Violence and Society

by

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Recent protest and confrontation movements have incorporated the obscene term or expression in statements of dissent. Scott and Smith (1969), Andrews (1969), and Griffin (1964) have all identified obscenity as a common characteristic of the "New Left" rhetoric of campus and black radicals. The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effects of these obscenities on the general public.

While media sources, when reporting on campus demonstrations, have indicated that "obscenities" were used, the specific words and expressions have often been omitted. Although the term "obscene" has many referents, it generates a fairly specific meaning for most people. For example, Read (1934) Stone (1954) and Montagu (1967) have all stated that the word "fuck" is the principal obscene word in the English language. This claim was supported by the experimental work of Rossiter and Bostrom (1969) who sampled a variety of populations and had subjects rank 17 socially taboo words. They found that ratings were fairly consistent across all population groups, and that people took the greatest offense to a derivative of the principal obscene term--"motherfucker." So, while the term "obscenity" is fairly abstract, it implies a highly structured set of evaluative attitudes.

Since obscenity can be used in a variety of ways to provoke a variety of responses (Lewis, 1970), several reactions of the general population to obscenity at a college demonstration were considered possible. One such reaction was a negative affective response. Montagu (1967) developed in depth the notion that swearing can be used as hostile or aggressive behavior. He claimed that obscenity can symbolically attack an object or person, and the recipient often acts as if he has been attacked. This logic would indicate that the general public would react to the college demonstrator using obscenity in a hostile and angry way, as if they had been attacked.

But obscenity has also been shown to provoke positive affective responses. Specific examples of this have been sighted in the literature. Sagarin (1962) stated:

> It is conceivable that one can say of another that he has been a fuckin good friend. This may be due to the generally watered-down tone resulting from frequency of use, as Graves has suggested, or it may be an avocation of the superlative character of a friendship that is strong enough to permit being described in such intimate terms. (p. 91)

Hartogs and Fantel (1968) presented another example in the business community, claiming that obscenities are used as tokens of social equality. They claimed that an employer would use obscenities to show that he is "one of the boys," preserving the pretense of equality of status between him and his subordinates. Evans-Pritchard (1929) postulated

that obscenity produces positive responses when:

1. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the activity in question,
2. Obscenity is used to canalize emotion into a prescribed channel at a period of human crisis, and
3. Obscenity furnishes both a stimulus and a reward at a time of combined and difficult labor.

Obscenity at a college demonstration could therefore possibly produce positive affective responses.

The present study attempted to determine whether the use of obscenities at college demonstrations creates negative, hostile responses among the general population, creates positive and inclusive feelings toward this group, or accomplishes both functions.

## METHODOLOGY

Data included in the present investigation was gathered as part of a larger study conducted in the Denver Metropolitan Area. Persons residing within this area and who were either household heads or responsible for the maintenance of a household unit constituted the target population.

Sampling procedures utilized techniques of stratification, clustering and multi-stage sampling, and systematic selection from cluster sampling lists to generate addresses for initial

contacts by interviewers. Quota sampling procedures were used by the interviewers who were told to interview approximately the same number of respondents who were under the age of 40 as were over the age of 40. They were also instructed to obtain approximately the same number of males as females. Finally, they were advised to complete over half the interviews during the weekend or during the evening to attempt to control for bias due to "not at homes." Substitution procedures were specified for the interviewer when a respondent could not be located at the starting address. (For a complete explication of the sampling procedures, a discussion of the adequacy of the sample selected, as well as a report of the larger study, see Lewis, 1970.)

Eight women from the staff of professional interviewers employed by Research Services, Incorporated, after receiving training from the present investigator, conducted the interviews. The interviews were all conducted between March 3, 1970, and March 19, 1970.

An interview schedule was constructed and pre-tested for for the larger study which contained open-ended, forced choice, and Likert-type scaled responses. Based on the pre-test results a final questionnaire was constructed which operationally defined obscenity as "sex, body, and toilet words, but not words like 'hell' and 'damn'." This

final questionnaire took an average of 45 minutes to complete. Two-hundred comp_eted questionnaires were obtained.

Content analysis codes were established for open-ended questions, and three college students were used to code the entire questionnaire for machine tabulation procedures. The percent of agreement of pairs of coders for 20 randomly selected questionnaires ranged from 91% to 94%, indicating high coder reliability.

## RESULTS

In order to determine reaction to obscenity, informants were asked to respond in two ways to the statement "When you hear someone use an obscene word or expression, how do you react?" The first response asked for was simply a statement by the respondent to this open-ended statement. The second response was on a Likert-type "Feeling Thermometer" scale, described by Moser (1958) as the

> . . . scatometer method. . . in which the respondent is shown a diagram of ten squares placed one above the other. The top five are white and are marked with a plus sign, the bottom five are black and are marked with a minus sign. The respondent is asked to indicate his attitude-position by pointing to the square which he considers most appropriate, taking the ten blocks to range from extreme favorableness to extreme unfavorableness. (pp. 235-236)

In order to determine particular reactions to obscenity when used at college demonstrations, informants were asked to respond to the statement "Suppose college students at a

demonstration use obscene terms or expressions to show their dislike of authority?" Both the open-ended responses and the scaled responses were obtained for this statement as well.

Scaled responses to these two questions are presented in Table I. Responses to the general statement about obscenity were distributed in a bi-modal fashion, with the two modes representing extreme negative feelings and neutral feelings. Responses to the statement about the use of obscenity at a college demonstration, on the other hand, was uni-modal, representing the extreme negative position. The overall response was much more negative to this second statement. While obscenity in general seemed to polarize people in two different groups, use of obscenity at a demonstration appeared to unify the general population in a negative attitude position.

This negative feeling was also demonstrated in the open-ended responses to the college demonstration statement. Table II shows that the most common reaction given was one of disgust, while the second most common was anger.

While the use of obscenity by the college demonstrator would appear to be counter-productive for demonstrators (that is, creates opposition to the goals of the demonstrators) when examining attitudes for the entire population, the same did not hold true for specific sub-populations. Non-caucasians

Table I. Scaled Responses to the Question: "Now Where Would You Place Your Feelings On The Thermometer When You Hear Someone Use An Obscene Word Or Expression," and "Suppose College Students At A Demonstration Use Obscene Terms Or Expressions To Show Their Dislike Of Authority. Where Would You Place Your Feelings On The Thermometer When You Hear This?"

| Scale Values | | General Reaction Question* (200 respondents) Percent | College Demonstration Question* (200 respondents) Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strong Negative Feelings | 1 | 28 | 60 |
| | 2 | 9 | 14 |
| | 3 | 10 | 10 |
| | 4 | 10 | 4 |
| | 5 | 13 | 2 |
| Neutral | 6 | 28 | 6 |
| | 7 | 1 | 1 |
| | 8 | - | 1 |
| | 9 | 1 | 1 |
| | 10 | - | 1 |
| Strong Positive Feelings | 11 | - | - |
| Don't Know/No Answer | | 2 | 2 |

*Totals do not equal 100% due to rounding error. This holds true also for all following tables unless otherwise noted.

Table II. Frequency of Selected Open-Ended Responses to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration.*

| Response Of** | Percent of Sample Responding (200) |
|---|---|
| Disgust: ("It's distasteful," "I disapprove," "It's unpleasant to me," etc.) | 47 |
| Anger: ("I hate it," "It makes me mad," "It upsets and irritates me," "Bugs me," etc.) | 21 |
| Unnecessary: ("Other words could be used," etc.) | 14 |

*Only responses given by 10% or more of the total sample are listed in this table. For a listing of other responses and their frequencies, see Lewis, (1970).

**Since the question was open-ended, responses are not mutually exclusive.

were significantly less negative toward the use of obscenity at college demonstrations than were caucasians (See Table III). In fact, 28% of the non-caucasian group was either neutral or positive.

Different age sub-groups also showed significantly different reactions, with older persons giving the more negative responses (See Table IV). While those under 30 were more inclined to give positive or neutral responses, persons between the ages of 30 and 49 appeared as negative as those 50 and older.

Groupings according to related attitudes also created sub-groups with significantly different reactions. Two groupings based on attitude toward sex were made by examining each respondent's answer to both of two questions. Informants were asked:

> Sex is being stressed today in movies, in plays on Broadway, and even in advertising. Which statement on this card best describes how you feel about this increasing emphasis on sex?
>
> It's a bad influence on our society.
> It's not necessarily bad, but it's being stressed too much.
> Doesn't make any difference one way or another.
> It's a healthy change.

They were also asked:

> Surveys have shown that young people are engaging in sex at an earlier age than ever before. Which of the statements on this card will be the result of this activity?
>
> It will make them better off.
> It will make no difference.
> It will make them not as well off.
> It will be very harmful for them.

Table III. Scale Response to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration by Race.

| | | Percent of Sample Group Responding | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race | scale value | Extremely Negative (1 or 2) | Somewhat Negative (3,4, or 5) | Neutral or Positive (6 or higher) |
| Caucasian* | (175) | 77 | 15 | 7 |
| Other | (25) | 52 | 20 | 28 |

* $\chi_1^2 = 7.72$, $p < .01$. For some tables it was necessary to combine categories to get an expected frequency greater than five. Where this was necessary, the "Somewhat Negative" category was combined with the "Neutral or Positive" category, causing the reduction in degrees of freedom for the $\chi^2$ value.

Table IV. Scale Response to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration by Age.

| Age | scale value | Percent of Sample Group Responding: Extremely Negative (1 or 2) | Somewhat Negative (3,4,or 5) | Neutral or Positive (6 or higher) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Under 30* | (55) | 57 | 22 | 22 |
| 30-49 | (75) | 84 | 11 | 5 |
| 50 and older | (67) | 80 | 17 | 3 |

* $\chi^2_4 = 19.80$, $p < .01$.

Informants responding "It's a bad influence on society" to the question about the increasing emphasis on sex and "very harmful" to the question about young people engaging in sex were classified in a "Negative Attitude Toward Sex" group. Informants saying "It's not necessarily bad" and "They're not as well off" to these two questions respectively, or giving responses even less critical to sex related issues on these questions, were classified in a "Positive Attitude Toward Sex" group. These groups reacted significantly differently to the statement about obscenity at a college demonstration, with the "Negative Sex Attitude" group reacting more negatively (See Table V).

Persons who were familiar with obscenity, that is, who tended both to hear and use obscenities, reacted differently from those who didn't (See Table VI). In this case, unfamiliarity seemed to breed contempt, with those unfamiliar with the use of obscenity reacting more negatively.

Further analysis of the data was conducted to determine if the variables resulting in differential reaction to obscenity at a college demonstration were interacting with one another. Since attitude toward sex and age were correlated, attitude toward sex was examined with control for age introduced (See Table VII). Attitude toward sex no longer significantly influenced reaction toward the obscenity when this control was introduced, even though the age control

Table V. Scale Responses to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration by Attitude Toward Sex.

| Attitude Toward Sex* | scale value | Percent of Sample Group Responding: Extremely Negative (1 or 2) | Somewhat Negative (3,4, or 5) | Neutral or Positive (6 or higher) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Attitude** | (60) | 55 | 22 | 22 |
| Negative Attitude | (67) | 86 | 12 | 2 |

*Definitions of each attitude category are given in the text.

** $\chi_2^2 = 16.45$, $p < .01$.

Table VI. Scale Responses to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration by Familiarity with Obscenity.*

| | | Percent of Sample Group Responding | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Familiarity | scale value | Extremely Negative (1 or 2) | Somewhat Negative (3,4, or 5) | Neutral or Positive (6 or higher) |
| Familiar (31)** | | 58 | 26 | 16 |
| Unfamiliar (36) | | 86 | 11 | 3 |

*Persons classified as being unfamiliar with obscenity picked the lowest frequency category when asked if they "hear words like that frequently, every so often or only once in a while," responded that they hear obscenities 5 or less times during an average week, and claimed to use no obscenities during the average week.

Persons classified as being familiar with obscenity, on the other hand, reported that they heard obscenities "frequently," heard them six or more times during a week, and used them at least once during the average week.

** $\chi_1^2 = 6.66$, $p < .01$.

Table VII. Scale Response to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration by Attitude Toward Sex, Controlled by Age.*

| Age | Attitude Toward Sex | scale value | Percent of Sample Group Responding: Extremely Negative (1 or 2) | Somewhat Negative (3,4,or 5) | Neutral or Positive (6 or higher) | Mean Response |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Under 40** | | | | | | |
| | Positive Attitude | (40) | 53 | 20 | 28 | 3.3 |
| | Negative Attitude | (19) | 63 | 26 | 11 | 2.5 |
| 40 or Older*** | | | | | | |
| | Positive Attitude | (22) | 87 | 14 | - | 1.5 |
| | Negative Attitude | (45) | 86 | 11 | 2 | 1.5 |

*Age was redefined for this table to provide larger respondent groups for each category.

** $\chi_1^2 = .59$, n.s.

*** $\chi_1^2 = .001$, n.s.

was very crude (the sample was divided into two groups, those under 40 and those 40 or older). Because date of birth is a variable more primary than attitude toward sex (occurs before attitude toward sex) it can be viewed as a primary variable in the relationship between attitude toward sex and reaction to obscenity at a college demonstration.

Since age and familiarity with obscenity were also correlated, the relationship between familiarity and reaction to the use of obscenity was also examined when controlled by age. Table VIII indicates that a complex interaction existed. Familiarity was not important in predicting reaction to obscenity for those 40 or older, but was still significant among those under 40. Those under 40 and who were unfamiliar with obscenity reacted as negatively as older persons, while those of the younger group who were more familiar with obscenity reacted much more positively. Twenty-eight percent of this latter group gave neutral or positive reactions.

Open-ended responses of the sub-groups showing significant differences were next examined (See Table IX). Caucasians were much more likely than other races to react with "anger," and much less likely to state that the use of obscenity at a college demonstration "didn't bother them." These responses were clearly consistent with scaled responses.

Age differences provided interesting divergencies among open-ended responses. Younger persons were much less likely than others to express disgust. But they were only slightly

Table VIII. Scale Response to Question About Obscenity Used at a College Demonstration by Familiarity with Obscenity, Controlled by Age.*

| Age | Familiarity scale value | Percent of Sample Group Responding: Extremely Negative (1 or 2) | Somewhat Negative (3,4, or 5) | Neutral or Positive (6 or higher) | Mean Response |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Under 40** | | | | | |
| | Familiar (32) | 53 | 19 | 28 | 3.4 |
| | Unfamiliar (18) | 84 | 11 | 6 | 1.7 |
| 40 or Older*** | | | | | |
| | Familiar (23) | 74 | 22 | 4 | 1.9 |
| | Unfamiliar (34) | 86 | 15 | - | 1.4 |

*Both Age and Familiarity definitions were changed to construct this table, in order to provide a larger number of respondents for each category. Familiarity was here defined as both hearing and using two or more obscenities during a week, while unfamiliarity was defined as both hearing and using fewer than two obscenities per week. These definitions of the familiarity variable were used for this table only.

** $\chi_1^2 = 5.29$, $p < .05$.

*** $\chi_1^2 = .68$, n.s.

Table IX. Selected Open-ended Responses to Question About Obscenity at a College Demonstration by Race, Age, Attitude Toward Sex, and Familiarity.*

| | Percent of Group Members Responding** | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Race | | Age | | | Attitude Toward Sex | | Familiarity | |
| Response | White (179) | Other (25) | Under 30 (55) | 30-49 (75) | 50 and older (67) | Positive Attitude (60) | Negative Attitude (67) | Familiar (31) | Unfamiliar (36) |
| Disgust: (It's distasteful," "I disapprove," "It's unpleasant to me," etc.) | 47 | 40 | 35 | 55 | 47 | 38 | 58 | 39 | 58 |
| Anger: ("I hate it," "It makes me mad," "It upsets and irritates me," "Bugs me," etc.) | 23 | 8 | 18 | 21 | 23 | 15 | 22 | 29 | 26 |
| Unnecessary: ("Other words could be used," etc.) | 15 | 8 | 26 | 8 | 11 | 17 | 15 | 19 | 13 |
| Doesn't Bother Me: ("I don't mind it," "I'd disregard it," "No reaction," "I'd expect it," etc.) | 4 | 16 | 15 | 4 | - | 13 | - | 13 | 3 |
| Direct Action Toward User: ("I'd beat them," "I'd tell them off," "I'd make them leave," etc.) | 5 | - | - | 1 | 12 | 2 | 8 | 7 | 5 |

*Only responses mentioned by more than 10% of any Group are reported here.
**Categories are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive, therefore totals should not be expected to equal 100%.

less likely to express anger. And this age group was much more likely to make the statement that the obscenities are unnecessary. Consistent with scaled responses, younger persons reported much more frequently that the use of obscenity didn't bother them.

One final difference appeared, as those who were 50 or older were much more likely than any other group to state that they would take direct action against the user of the obscenity. In fact, only one person below the age of 50 made this type of a statement.

Those with a "Positive Attitude Toward Sex" gave open-ended responses very similar to those in the under 30 age group with only one exception--they were not quite as likely to state that they felt the use of obscenity was unnecessary. The open-ended responses of the sub-groups based on attitude toward sex did not appear to contradict the idea that age is a primary variable for explaining the relationship between sex attitude and reaction to obscenity.

Sub-groups based on familiarity with obscenity did show differences from age groupings on open-ended responses. Those more familiar with obscenity (who, as a group, gave significantly less negative scaled responses), stated a disgust reaction much less frequently than those who were unfamiliar. But they gave responses of anger more frequently. They were more likely to say that the use of obscenity didn't bother them, but they were slightly more likely to say that they would take some direct action about the situation.

## DISCUSSION

The sample of the Denver Metropolitan Area reacted extremely negatively toward the use of obscenity in college demonstrations. This negative reaction was even stronger than the reaction to obscenity generally. These results imply that negative feelings towards college students using obscenity in demonstrations are among the strongest held by the general population, and agree with the Harris poll finding that college demonstrators are more generally detested than prostitutes, atheists and homosexuals (Hickey, 1971). And while obscenity tended to polarize the population into two divergent groups, the population was much more unanimous in their negative reactions toward the use of obscenity by college demonstrators.

While the data generated by the entire population sample would indicate that the use of obscenity by college demonstrators created only negative feelings towards them, this finding was not consistent with reactions of specific subgroups. Non-caucasians, who the demonstrators often claim to represent, were much less negatively affected than were caucasians. In fact, a sizable minority of this group reported either neutral or positive feelings.

Younger persons, who demonstrators also often claim to represent, responded much more favorably than did those who were older. Those under 30 responded much differently than

older respondents. Again, a sizable minority of this group reported neutral or positive feelings.

Two other sub-groups were found to react significantly less negatively toward the obscenity at a college demonstration; the first was the group with the most positive attitude toward sex, the second was the group most familiar with obscenity. However the variables of attitude toward sex and familiarity with obscenity were both found to be affected by the variable of age. Much of the variance accounted for by both of these variables, especially attitude toward sex, was removed by controlling for age. This suggests that, rather than chronological age, an age related cluster of attitudes is what is important in determining reactions. Attitude toward sex is at least one of these attitudes. Future research should more fully explore age related attitudes to more fully define this attitude cluster. It is possible that the above findings could be explained by variables such as liberalism-conservatism, or even dogmatism. Research into the differences between the "generations" (and the oft mentioned age of 30 may be the dividing point) may help explain different reactions to the new "obscene" rhetorics.

Open-ended questions indicated more "disgust" than "anger" on the part of the general population. However, those persons under 30 as well as those with a positive sex attitude were much less likely to give responses of "disgust"

effective for reaching specific sub-groups. And it may be that the reaction of the general population to the obscenity forces support of the demonstrators by sub-groups who are initially only slightly negative. The obscenity, then, may be an extremely important, if subtle, rhetorical device, achieving support for the college demonstrators from groups whose support they desire.

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